

Pat Thomas

Clearinghouse for Information on Merchant Mariner Benefits

Story and Photo By Ella Thomas
Office of Congressional and Public Affairs

American merchant mariners have a gem when it comes to Pat Thomas of MARAD's Office of Sealift Support. She has a treasure chest of information on merchant marine veteran benefits, medals, decorations and what she doesn't have she can find.



Pat Thomas, Office of Sealift Support, handles all inquiries regarding merchant mariner benefits.

While MARAD was still an agency within the Commerce Department in the late '70s, Pat was the secretary to the director of maritime manpower. The staff person handling merchant marine medals was retiring. She wanted

someone to take it over. She raced by Pat's desk and dropped a stack of unopened letters requesting merchant marine medals and decorations for World War II service. Almost 30 years later, she is still handling these type of requests. Pat handles a myriad of written and oral inquiries regarding merchant marine veteran benefits, awards, decorations and prescription benefits assistance. Pat receives a tremendous amount of correspondence from congressional offices with constituents wanting to know their benefits.

According to Pat, "Since merchant mariners who served in World War II were finally awarded veteran status in 1988, there has been a tremendous increase in requests from merchant mariners who want to obtain discharge certificates and to find if their survivors may be eligible for certain benefits and services from the Veterans Administration."

The brave men and women who carried "beans, bandages and bullets" to troops during World War II are the only group of merchant mariners recognized as veterans. U.S. merchant mariners who served through the Korean War, Vietnam War, Operation Desert Storm and Operation Iraqi Freedom are not recognized as veterans and will not receive benefits; they're only recognized as civilians. When Pat receives inquiries regarding merchant marine veteran benefits, Pat refers them to the appropriate Department of Veterans Affairs office to assist them. MARAD doesn't administer benefits to merchant mariners.

For the past several years, Pat has noticed that baby boomers are now inquiring what benefits their fathers who served in World War II are entitled to.

When someone is trying to locate a merchant mariner, Pat refers them to the U.S. Coast Guard, which maintains a database of all past and current U.S. merchant mariners. The U.S. Coast Guard also maintains the casualty lists from World War II. Pat has received phone calls and letters over the years from people searching for long-lost loved ones who served in the merchant marine.

Pat's altruism, warm personality and smiling phone voice have earned her quite a fan club over the years. She has had many merchant marine veterans come visit her in her office and she stays in touch with quite a few by phone and mail.

Pat has been receiving a lot of inquiries from the Canadian and Australian governments to see if their merchant marine veterans, indeed, sailed with the U.S. merchant marine during times of war so they can receive paid pensions and recognition from their governments for what they did for our government. Pat also refers those inquiries to the U.S. Coast Guard.

Today, Operation Iraqi Freedom merchant mariners are receiving medals. Pat processes all that paperwork, too.

More on the Operation Iraqi Freedom medals in a future issue of MARAD Update.

MARAD Update

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